

## Baptism of Fire: the Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1995 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Baptism of Fire: the Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878." *The Annals of Iowa* 54 (1995), 145-147.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9902>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

limited participation in the prophet's elite inner circle, and plural marriage, as well as activities with several maverick leaders of westward expeditions (James Emmett, George Miller, Lyman Wight)—make him especially interesting to historians of Mormonism.

The portion of Butler's biography devoted to the westward trek (chapters four through nineteen) is also the most pertinent to the history of Iowa and the Midwest. Hartley's description of Mormon missions to the Sioux in 1840 and 1840–41 and the activities of the Emmett expedition are an invaluable contribution to these poorly understood but significant events. The remainder of Hartley's account elaborates Butler's life as a Utah Mormon pioneer, including several local leadership roles, until his death in 1860 at fifty-two years of age.

Hartley's book is entertaining and valuable simply as a concrete story of everyday American life. The Butlers, as Mormons, were not, of course, typical Americans. Furthermore, as southerners, they were among a minority—a significant and somewhat neglected one—of early Mormon converts, most of whom were New Englanders. Hartley thereby furnishes a vivid picture of the daily experiences and existence of southern converts to the most distinctive and successful new religion produced by American culture. His telling of the Butlers' story also supplies a scholarly description of noteworthy events that are relevant to the Mormon experience in Iowa and the Midwest.

*Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838–1878*, by Robert Cook. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994. xiii, 310 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOEL H. SILBEY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

The Republican Party emerged in Iowa in the mid-1850s, as it did everywhere else, in response to the failure of the two old parties to resist aggressive southern challenges that seemed to threaten northern values, interests, and prejudices. Drawing on a wide range of protest already on the scene, it had some initial difficulties in bringing disparate groups together and in defining itself clearly among the many sources of its original support. The story of the party's early years, therefore, shows how a revolt of a number of unconnected groups (antislavery advocates, lifelong Democrats, Whigs, temperance reformers, and anti-Irish and anti-Catholic nativists) was ultimately welded into a united party behind an antisouthern ideology and transformed by war into a vehicle of emancipation and the further expansion of black rights. Economic outlooks and interests, ethnic and religious prejudices, responses to the strong modernizing tendencies present in the United States, humanitarianism, and powerful

demands for more racial equality all played a role, in different mixes, with different emphases at different times. Republicanism's rise is a well-known story, but it still is the focus of much scholarly attention, because historians continue to disagree (often intensely) about which emphases, particular elements, and directions to stress in their analyses. Any additions to the record, further clarification of party members' intentions and behavior, or recasting of the story is, therefore, of much interest.

Robert Cook effectively covers the story of the early years of the Iowa Republicans, mapping the landscape of a familiar story in a particular setting. The Hawkeye state's unusual status in those years makes this study of more than the usual interest. A strong Democratic state since it entered the Union with a population that included many people who were sympathetic to southern values and commitments, Iowa became one of the most solidly Republican states in the nation from the mid-1850s on. Furthermore, Iowans, who were militantly antiblack before the Civil War, largely changed their minds subsequently, as Robert Dykstra has pointed out in his recent superb study of mid-nineteenth-century racial attitudes in the state, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (1993), a book that covers much of the same ground as Cook's.

Cook draws extensively on the flood of recent research about the party generally to echo the familiar story already in place and to frame it within one state. He begins his description in the late 1830s in order to understand the particular political environment that produced the state's Republican groupings, and carries his narrative to the end of Reconstruction to mark the party's final settling down as the institution that saved the Union. He places his description firmly within the existing historiographical context as he traces the party's origins and its search for unity and for a successful electoral theme that would guarantee its success. His research is wide and thorough, and he makes extensive use of surviving manuscripts, newspapers, and other contemporary material.

Some historians of the emergence of the Republican Party, such as Eric Foner, have stressed sophisticated notions of different ideologies rooted in economic processes and the maturing of market capitalism to explain the coming together of a northern party dedicated to ending slavery at a time when the United States was increasingly dedicated to a free labor ideology. Others, such as William Gienapp, have measured the effects of tension between different ethnic and religious groups due to the explosion of immigration in the late forties and early fifties in creating the particular landscape and situation out of which Republicanism emerged. The story remains contentious and

provocative. Cook draws on it all to present an eclectic summary, taking much from Foner, while also drawing a great deal on Gienapp and others who have argued about the political revolution of the 1850s. He does not move much beyond what these historians have argued, seemingly satisfied that integrating different emphases provides a more complete picture than we have had.

Beyond Cook's interpretive eclecticism, much of his approach and presentation remains conventional, old-fashioned history, conceptually and methodologically conservative. The narrative is straightforward and familiar, covering the ground from the Kansas-Nebraska controversy to the retreat from Reconstruction. Cook marks the general landscape well but probes very little beneath the surface. He largely follows the familiar format of showing how Iowa reacted to and echoed national events in the rise of the Republican Party. He does not tell the story as much as retell it, emphasizing Iowa Republicanism's shrewd, pragmatic leadership and, following Dykstra, the party's radicalization during the Civil War.

Where his work is innovative, in the use of quite sophisticated quantitative methods to trace party blocs in Iowa's legislature on a number of issues, he presents some interesting and imaginative material. But these forays into more systematic analysis are tentative, spotty, and underdeveloped. Cook largely focuses on the party elites, from the old timers—James Grimes and James Harlan—to the emerging younger generation led by William Boyd Allison. Their correspondence is the basic evidence for his presentation of their plans, hopes, reading of the situation, and expectations. He does no careful voter analysis, which has been a mainstay of recent studies of political parties of this era and which demands a very different style of analysis. (He does take such evidence from some other studies and presents it to a degree, but not, I would argue, enough). Nor does he examine the organizational structure of the party and the critical linkages that brought the rhetoric of leadership into the orbit of voter concerns and helped frame choice in effective, continuing ways. As a result, his description is incomplete and his analysis short-circuited.

*Baptism of Fire* is a useful book. Its story of the emergence and consolidation of the Republican Party in Iowa is clearly presented and opens up some new corners. If it remains incomplete in its coverage and misses opportunities for more extensive analysis and understanding, there are rewards in it for those many scholars who have an interest in the early history of the Republican Party, American social tensions, the coming of the Civil War, and the political development of the nineteenth-century Middle West.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.